

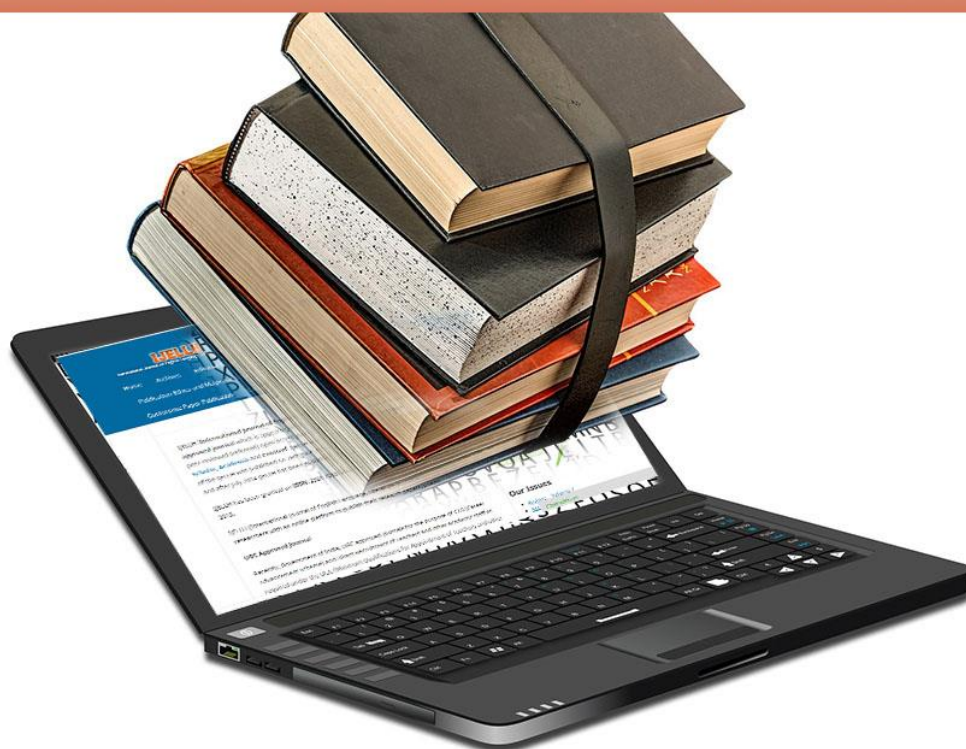
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Politics of Intra-community Marginalization: A Reading of Select Short Stories of

Mahasweta Devi

Abstract

Marginalisation is basically a political activity of socio-cultural exclusion inside or outside the communities. When this multilayered marginalisation takes place between two communities, for example, an individual belonging to the upper caste/class marginalises a lower caste/class individual in the public space, it is called an inter-community marginalisation. It is more obvious and can be found everywhere. But, it also occurs within a community where no such hierarchy exists between individuals. It is a more subtle and acute form of intra-community marginalisation which is psychologically damaging to the individuals of that community. When this intra-community marginalisation occurs in an indigenous social context, it is worth exploring as it insists on the basic conflict between the individual and his or her ethnic community. So, the conflict between an individual and the collective within a particular community is to be explored in literary texts to trace the roots of exploitation. To bring out my point I will focus on intra-community marginalisation in some specific Indian indigenous social contexts as represented in three short stories ('*Bayen*', '*The Hunt*', '*Dhouli*') written by Mahasweta Devi.

Key Words: Intra-community, Marginalisation, Multilayered, Individual, Collective exploitation, Surveillance.

Marginalization, as we all know, is basically a political activity of socio-cultural exclusion inside or outside the communities. It presupposes the existence of a hierarchy which is based on unequal ethnic, socio-cultural, politico-cultural and economic factors. So, it brings to the fore the binary between dominant and subjugated, centre and margin. But, this categorization ultimately leads to the simplification of the idea of multilayered marginalization. There is no singular interpretation of this political activity of marginalization and no parameter regarding the assumption of superiority on the part of an individual or a community over 'others'. The sense of superiority is established by strategic distinction and classification. It implies certain attributes which identify that dominant community or an individual as distinguished from others who lack those qualities. Partha Chatterjee in chapter nine ('The Nation and its Outcasts') of his book, *The Nation and its Fragments* has explored how this qualitative distinction and classification among individuals or communities "can be ordered as a quantitative ranking in a scale of hierarchy" (176).

Political exclusion of an individual or a community helps to consolidate this socio-political hierarchy. But this hierarchy is not always visible in each social framework, but it can be easily traced in inter-community marginalization. When marginalization takes place between two communities, for example, an individual belonging to the upper caste/class marginalizes a lower caste/class individual, it is called an inter-community marginalization. It is more obvious and can be found everywhere. Here ethnic identity becomes prominent, but sometimes the idea of community becomes blurred since the individual can assume superiority over others on the basis of his or her caste/class or political status.

Marginalization also occurs within a community where no palpable hierarchy exists among individuals. It is a more subtle and acute form of intra-community marginalization

which is psychologically damaging to the individuals of that community. It is often neglected and not taken into consideration by the narrative of marginalization. So far as intra-community marginalization is concerned, it has nothing to do with the ethnic identity of the excluded individual. When it occurs in an indigenous social context, it is worth exploring as it insists on the basic conflict between an individual and his or her ethnic community. If an individual poses a challenge to the collective hegemony by going against their ruthless diktat or deviating from the socially prescribed roles, he or she is subjected to socio-political exclusion by the community. In this scenario the situation of the individual becomes pathetic as he or she is marginalized both inside and outside the community. In the name of ethnic integrity ruthless exploitation takes place and the individual becomes a scapegoat in the hands of the community. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* has discussed the tactics of disciplinary control and individualising discipline: “Generally speaking, all the authorities, exercising individual control function according to the double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal), and that coercive assignment, of differential distribution, who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc” (Foucault 199).

Since in an intra-community marginalization an individual confronts the collective, he or she is often rendered powerless by collective hegemony. The individual also feels insecure under collective surveillance what Foucault has termed as ‘panoptic discipline’. Communities uphold their own ‘customary laws’ to judge any activity in terms of right or wrong. Since it is customary it is strictly maintained and accepted by all. It also underscores the fact that power always operates in the form of collective entity. Hannah Arendt rightly observes: “Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group remains together. When we say of somebody that he is in ‘power’ we

actually refer to his being empowered by certain number of people to act in that name” (44). So, any deviation from existing social norms leads to political exclusion of the individual from his or her ethnic community. Sometimes social segregation of the individual is developed into a psychological state of alienation. The conviction of the ‘subject’ regarding its subservient position further consolidates the equation of power and control. It traces the politics of intra-community marginalization which is successfully monitored through a process of imposition and acceptance between the community and the individual who belongs to it.

Social media often does not provide elaborate coverage to intra-community marginalization and it is not adequately represented in literary texts. So, the idea of marginalization should be reconceptualised in order to take into consideration those indigenous people who are marginalized within their own ethnic communities. One has to delve deep into the discourse of marginality to trace the roots of exploitation and concentrate more on internal socio-political dynamics of a community rather than on external issues to trace the subtlety of intra-community marginalization. To bring out my point I will focus on intra-community marginalization in some specific Indian indigenous social contexts as represented in some short stories of Mahasweta Devi. My reading of three short stories, ‘*Bayen*’, ‘*The Hunt*’ and ‘*Dhouli*’ will foreground the complexity and variety of socio-political exclusion that occurs within some specific ethnic communities. Mahasweta Devi is known for her activist writings where she has championed the cause of the dispossessed people of India. In laying bare the problems faced by these people she has also addressed the issues related to all the indigenous people of the world. But the Indian indigenous social scenario demands special attention for its regional and cultural specificities. Despite the author’s avowed preoccupation with class, the issue of intra-community marginalization is also raised and explored in her writings.

'*Bayen*' narrates the collective scapegoating of Chandi who was ostracized by the same Dom community which later accorded her the status of honour. For Chandi the situation becomes more adverse when she is convinced regarding her miraculous power. Her unconscious acceptance of the subject position further cements her identity as a 'bayen'. The baseless imputation of witchcraft followed by psychological torture which ultimately leads to socio-political exclusion, suggests the covert functioning of a subtle mechanism. The marginalization of Chandi is not only political but also gendered in nature and the subject is thrice marginalized on the level of caste, class and gender. If the narrative is further explored, what will be exposed beneath the veneer of superstition, is the projection of collective fear and envy regarding the helpless subject.

MALINDAR (Strokes her chin). Oh yes, a red shirt for the son, a red sari and a yellow blouse for the son's mother.

CHANDIDASI. No, no, not for me. It only makes people envious and they cast an evil eye. (Devi 81)

The 'making' of a 'bayen' suggests the subtle process of intra-community marginalization which denies Chandi to fulfil her basic need. The 'mother' within her is played off against the imposed persona of a 'bayen'. She questions the ruthless edict of her community: "CHANDIDASI. They say I have the evil eye. The little ones die of summer heat, winter's cold, and small pox, don't they? And is it any fault of mine?" (82) It is a more acute form of socio-political exclusion since it is responsible not only for Chandi's segregation and denial of maternal affection but also for her psychological torture. It separates more a mother from her son who needs her care and protection rather than a wife from her husband. "CHANDIDASI. ... When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts bursting with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay away from him" (82). Madhumita Chakraborty wrote: "The individual, after all, is a

small cog in the wheel that enables the community to continue to function. And in the Indian context, communities, especially in villages of rural India, are strictly codified – on the lines of caste, class and gender. And women literally are on the edge of such classification” (200).

Chandi, totally oblivious of being watched by her community, experiences her motherhood. It becomes a spectacle since the collective interprets it from their biased point of view. The collective surveillance renders her powerless and situates her in the relationship of power. The coercive practices and psychological torture politically transform her submission into conviction. It not only relegates her further to the margin but also makes her position vulnerable. It can be theorized through Foucauldian review of Bentham’s ‘panopticon’ where Foucault traces the logic of relationship between gaze and power, surveillance and subordination. The observer always wields power over the subject who is inspected and surveyed (Foucault 202-209). In the story we find that superstition accords punitive authority to the collective and ensures the subservience of the individual within the community by means of cunning and malicious rumours. In spite of the political exclusion and psychological incarceration meted out to Chandi by her community, she takes pride over her formidable lineage and inherited vocation. Her relentless struggle for survival amid adverse situation and physical exhaustion questions and threatens existing social codes and the sense of power and control. Spivak wrote in ‘Translator’s Preface’ of *Imaginary Maps*: “When the subaltern ‘speaks’ in order to be heard and gets into the structure of response (responding or being responded to) resistance, he or she on his way to becoming an organic intellectual” (xxi).

The story focuses more on the mother-son relationship which opens up possibility for the mother to reclaim her position within the community. Bhagirath questions the societal distinction between a bayen and an affectionate mother. Caring a fig for all superstitions woven around her, Chandi sacrificed her life for the sake of her community. The spectacular

incident redeems her honour and conveys an iota of hope to unsettle rigid social framework and rethink about the preconceived notions. But it is not a linear narrative of affiliation. Bhagirath's assertion regarding her mother's sanity comes after her posthumous recognition. "... she was never a bayen, my mother" (91). It suggests that her affiliation may be politically engineered to establish the hitherto forgotten link between the individual and the community and in this way to share the posthumous privilege which her identity as a 'martyr' provides.

The form of socio-political exclusion in '*The Hunt*' varies from that of '*Bayen*'. Here the absence of any straightforward ostracization invites the readers to explore several layers of marginalization. So far as Mary's ethnic identity is concerned, she is an illegitimate offspring of a tribal woman and her Australian master. Her 'mixed' blood is responsible for her exclusion from the mainstream tribal community but it offers her freedom from societal codes and conventions. She also enjoys her sexual autonomy regarding choosing the man she wants to marry. In the narrative what is more palpable is Mary's psychological state of alienation rather than her physical segregation. So, it deserves a nuanced approach instead of interpreting it in terms of insider-outsider.

Mary's hybrid identity within the Oraon community has problematized the traditional spatial division and classification. Within her psyche she feels the collision between colonial encroachment and postcolonial indigenous resistance. Although she has excavated a space of her own, she is torn between allegiance to the community and the autonomy provided by her hybrid identity. She has a mixed feeling to become a part of the community and the realization of the impossibility of such affiliation.

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her.

She would have rebelled if they had. She is unhappy that they don't. In her inmost heart there is somewhere a longing to be part of the Oraons. (Devi 5)

Mary's position makes her situation vulnerable to the feudal exploitative forces from outside as symbolized by Tehsildar. Oraons are not really concerned about her precarious condition. Tehsildar also understood the fact that convention of Oraons couldn't subjugate her indomitable spirit. The community shows its negligence regarding any decision-making. So, they didn't interfere in her decision to marry Jalim, a Muslim boy rather than any member from her community. Being questioned by Mrs. Prasad Mary justifies her position. "Why not? The Muslim says he'll marry. Your brother wanted only to keep me" (4). Her existence is spatialized in such a way that makes her emotionally vacuous.

Mary was unwilling. She is accepted in the village society. The women are her friends, she is the best dancer at the feasts. But that doesn't mean she wants to live their life. (3)

Tehsildar's feudal gaze tries to situate Mary to a subservient position. But Mary subverts the invisible power structure by raising her machete and threatening Tehsildar who tried to outrage her modesty. The ritualistic hunt on the occasion of 'Jani Parab' is strategically transformed into an instrument of political resistance against exploitative forces. Mary's killing of Tehsildar may be interpreted as sanctifying the idea of purification within tribal culture. In 'Author in Conversation' at the beginning of *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta Devi observed:

Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. ... Women have place of honour in tribal society. ... I think as far as the tribals or the oppressed are concerned, violence is justified when the system fails in justice, violence is justified. The system resorts to violence when people rise to redress some grievance, to protest. (xi-xii)

The spectacular punishment meted out to Tehsildar may reinvigorate the tribal tradition and upholds Mary's sense of belonging to the community, but it is ambivalent whether she completely identifies herself with the Oraons. The narrative does not insinuate such possibility of a politico-cultural assimilation. The Oraons are neither convinced by Mary regarding Tehsildar's vicious plan nor they show any solidarity in her crusade against the forces of exploitation. This ignorance and negligence on part of the Oraons set her apart from them. Her tirade is aimed not only against the Tehsildars but also against the socio-political subservience of the Oraons. The individual protest is not realized by the collective and it marks the gruesome reality of intra-community marginalization. Jennifer Wenzel wrote: "The trajectory of Mary's wonderful tale in no way changes the lives of the Oraons in Kuruda, and her own singularity lessens the likelihood of her resistance becoming exemplary" (181).

In the Indian indigenous society various punitive measures and repentance rites are undertaken by communities to circumscribe the deviant individuals. The coercion meted out to the excluded individuals makes their situation more pathetic and precarious. 'Dhouli', taken from the collection *Outcast*, has the theme of sexual exploitation and subsequent exclusion. It draws readers' attention to inter-community marginalization vis-à-vis intra-community marginalization. Dhouli is sexually exploited and deserted by upper class Misrilal only to be further excluded and exploited within her own community. It leads to the forceful separation of Dhouli from her offspring given birth by a person outside the community.

Dhouli was entrapped by a false promise of marriage but her seduction by Misrilal is interpreted in terms of deviation from societal norms and breach of allegiance to her community. It does not suggest the gullible nature of Dhouli rather the lack of proper understanding and solidarity on the part of the community which could not protect its womenfolk from feudal exploitative forces. Instead of showing solidarity with the exploited individual, the community relegates her further to the margin. This socio-political segregation

turns her situation more vulnerable. This marginalization is more ruthless since it disregards even the basic human instinct for survival. Dhouli, thus caught almost between two exploitative forces, is rendered powerless. After the desertion of Misrilal, Dhouli is subjected to abject poverty and humiliation.

Their village society held Dhouli solely responsible. Her kinsfolk rejected her because she had fallen in love. She had kept aloof from men of her community. ... But Dhouli had been willing. An unforgivable offence. The Dusad-ganju lads and contractor's coolies were watching closely to see how the situation developed. (Devi 14)

This collective surveillance over the politically excluded individual situates her in a power relation. The sense of authority assumed by the collective is politico-sexual in nature and Dhouli unconsciously challenges both political and sexual possession of the subject.

No one's brought shame on Dhouli. She was in love. And she spurned the men of her own caste. We are not interested in what happens to her. Let her do what she can. (22)

This negligence on part of the community shows the limitations of its socio-cultural framework. Dhouli was unaware of the gruesome consequences of the violation of prevalent code. She does not succumb to pressure mounted on her, rather she challenges the collective hegemony. In choosing prostitution as means of livelihood, she has unsettled the feudal order and the sense of control assumed by the collective. Her subsequent expulsion from the village does not underscore her subservience but reinforces her singularity and the possibility of counter-hegemonic forces.

Three stories explored in my paper have unearthed multiple layers of intra-community marginalization in some specific Indian indigenous social contexts. It has also traced the subtlety and degrees of marginality to expose various roots of exploitation. From my reading it is obvious that within an ethnic community the collective has to rethink about its socio-cultural parameters and conventions. Instead of imposing harsh injunctions, they have to

show solidarity with those helpless individuals who are exploited on the level of caste, class and gender. Beyond the insider-outsider configuration there may be a shared space for negotiation between the individual and the collective. Intra-community marginalization should be adequately represented because the politically excluded individuals within their communities are often vulnerable to exploitative forces from outside.

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